

Panorama: Insights into Asian and European Affairs is a series of occasional papers published by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's "Regional Programme Political Dialogue Asia/Singapore".

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Editor: Dr. Wilhelm Hofmeister

Sub-editor: Megha Sarmah

Publisher:

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Ltd

34/36 Bukit Pasoh Road

Singapore 089848

Registration Number: 201228783N

Tel: (65) 6227-2001

Tel: (65) 6227-8343

Email: politics.singapore@kas.de

Website: <http://www.kas.de/singapore>

Manuscript offers, review copies, exchange journals, and requests for subscription are to be sent to the editors. The responsibility for facts and opinions in this publication rests exclusively with the authors and their interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views or the policy of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

Cover photograph by ©iStock.com/Simon Podgorsek

Design, Layout and Typeset:

Select Books Pte Ltd

65A, Jalan Tenteram

#02-06, St Michael's Industrial Estate

Singapore 328958

Website: www.selectbooks.com.sg

PANORAMA
INSIGHTS INTO ASIAN
AND EUROPEAN AFFAIRS

From the Desert to World Cities The New Terrorism



Konrad
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The Virtual Reality of Youth, Radicalization, and Terrorism

Elina Noor

As the grounds of the Levant turn increasingly grisly with groups like the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) and Jabhat al-Nusra, a new battlefield has emerged online, attracting droves of teenagers from around the world to the bloody sectarian ganglands of Syria and Iraq.

This paper will discuss the role of technology in the radicalisation and recruitment of youth into violence in three parts. First, it will outline the evolution of online propaganda from passive websites conveying information to the masses to the personalisation of social media appealing to the youth. Second, it will explore counter-radicalisation measures online, including creative counter-narrative messaging initiatives. Finally, this paper will suggest that despite the growing trend of online propaganda, the structural drivers of extremism that appear so alluring to the youth are, in fact, offline, and should be strategically and preventatively addressed in that realm. Examples from Malaysia will be shared in each of these segments for contextual indication.

WIRED FOR EXTREMISM?

Although terrorism has regrettably become associated with Muslims almost by default since the millennium, the extremist groups that began exploiting the Internet to disseminate propaganda were in fact more diverse. It is the right-wing White supremacist group Stormfront that is often credited with having launched the first hate group Internet forum in the early 1990s. What started as an online bulletin board has morphed into a discussion forum that, to date, has nearly 300,000 members, and more than 800,000 conversation threads ranging from poetry and creative writing to politics and youth, spawning over 11 million posts.¹

Shuttered from the mainstream physical space, groups such as the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam (LTTE), *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), and Communist Party of the Philippines/New People's Army (CPP/NPA) used the Internet to magnify their presence, justify their causes and actions, and recruit sympathizers across time zones and at minimal expense. Their fighters, vilified as subversive rebels

¹ Stormfront website, <https://www.stormfront.org/forum/>.

and terrorists within national borders and beyond, were glorified revolutionaries or nationalists on the World Wide Web. Where the veneer of religion was used to justify violence, such as when Al-Neda was set up as Al-Qaeda's first website, fighters were holy warriors or martyrs whose eternal rewards awaited them in paradise.

Although these websites generally functioned as information portals, they differed in their presentation and messaging depending on time and target audience. Groups that entreated to the intellect rather than to sentiments projected the image of a lucid, rational victim rather than a sociopathic one. Some, like the LTTE's, were designed to appear sophisticated to appeal to a diasporic base abroad – much of which comprised adult professionals – for funding and donations. Others, such as the Pattani United Liberation Organisation's (PULO), offered an explanation of their cause in multiple languages to reach a wider range of sympathizers.

Still others were less compunctious about exploiting baser emotions through the Internet, particularly as Web 1.0 and the passive means of communication it offered evolved to become more dynamic and interactive. As connections to the Internet burgeoned from 500 million in 2001 to 2.3 billion by the end of 2011 (totalling more than one-third of the world population at that time) with 45 percent constituting users below the age of 25,² radical and extremist websites embraced technology and embedded the myriad multimedia options available – audio, video, RSS feed subscriptions, and even cartoons and games with flash animation for children. Images and videos chosen were often graphic, calculated to provoke and inflame in line with a narrative of being under siege and victimized or oppressed. Implicit was the message of a natural call to (re) action – violent, if necessary. Hate music, long a staple subculture of the right-wing youth community and formerly accessible *en masse* only through large-scale festivals, started being streamed online and hosted on websites like Skrewdriver Radio and Aryan Radio, specifically dedicated to White Power music.

Leveraging on the growth of mobile-enabled devices and broadband connectivity, websites adapted their content for various operating systems, at once becoming more accessible to a booming digital generation. The website of Indonesia's Front Pembela Islam once boasted availability on the platforms of BlackBerry, iPhone, iPad, and Android.

The convergence of social media and an exponential shift to smarter mobile devices, however, changed the game and the landscape of radicalisation. As blogs marked the transitory phase between traditional websites and applications like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, mobile traffic augmented the space the Internet provided to articulate the politics of identity and recognition, to flatten strict hierarchical structures offline, to amplify and empower the voice of the individual, and to reinforce similar viewpoints across the globe.

² "Measuring the Information Society 2012", International Telecommunication Union, 2012: Geneva, http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/publications/mis2012/MIS2012_without_Annex_4.pdf.

Social media offers the personalisation of a narrative through filtered lens – sometimes literally, as on Instagram. Viewed through rose- or X-Pro II-tinted filters, the harsh realities of conflict appear instead as vain-gloried distortions of adventure and poetic justice. The stories told on social media are only the half of it – spliced for brevity and the fleeting attention span of hyper-stimulated youths. Yet, it also lends a humanising element that connects the reader or viewer to the thought process of the proponent as well as to the distant struggle being fought. Before they were repeatedly taken down, the Bird of Jannah Tumblr and blog accounts of a reportedly Malaysian woman doctor in her late 20s in Syria read like the measured and compelling, if somewhat romanticised, musings of a young professional who continually rationalised her actions. Similarly, Ahmad Salman Ahmad Rahim, a Malaysian in Syria fighting for a higher cause under the cover of religion, paints a wistful and resigned yet contented picture of his experiences on Facebook. A former documentary maker, his photos and videos capture the terrain's barren ruggedness and his Spartan existence in Syria. His posts are usually contemplative and accompanied by either solitary photos of himself staring into the distance or flanked by other brothers-in-arms.

What social media – with its user-generated content – has done is heralded a do-it-yourself age of radicalisation that empowers anyone to not only have a voice or an opinion but to contribute, propagate and amplify that message at any time. Young men and women who have travelled to Iraq and Syria engage in video conversations using Snapchat or Kik; exchange tweets in 140 characters or less with hashtags, and conduct questions and answers for the curious on Ask.fm. The ubiquity of social media and its availability in multiple languages also means that posts, pages, comments and discussion can be as localized or as globalized as participants want them to be on an even greater scale than in the past.

In breaking down classical relational structures in real life, the Internet, at large, has also proven to be a perversely empowering space for conservative communities. The flattening of the virtual world coupled with round-the-clock social networking feeds means that even traditional gender gaps are deconstructed so that while some Muslim women may face cultural restrictions in, or feel uncomfortable, communicating freely with their male counterparts in the physical realm, the Internet allows that communication where it might not otherwise be socially acceptable. These women can still have their person or identity “hidden” on the Internet while communicating directly with the opposite sex and volunteering their moral or more active support in conflict-ridden areas.

Of course, for many of these young women, the feeling of global sisterhood is enhanced online – a powerful virtual bond is formed and affirmed even among strangers through social networks. Selfies of fully-covered “sisters” who moved, against their family's wishes, to IS-controlled areas in Syria punctuate social media feeds along with an amusing mix of teenage slang, text acronyms (“LOL”), emoticons (“<3”) and

religious references. The women usually take on new names in their new environment, online and offline. A 21-year-old British medical student who gained notoriety posting a photo of herself holding up a severed head in Raqqa in September 2014 goes by the moniker Mujahidah bint Usama, while a 20-year-old Scot named Aqsa Mahmood who has been quite prolific on Tumblr and Twitter is known as Umm Layth (or “mother of lion”, in Arabic).

For these and like-minded young women, the messaging on social media flits between beatific, peaceful images of birds (symbolic of the religious reference to *hijrah* or migration), skies, and mountains to more aggressive ones such as those posted by the British Halane twins. In one Twitter picture, the armed twins, members of IS’s all-women Al-Khansaa Brigade, are with two other also-armed and *niqab*-clad friends in a gutted out room conducting “target practice”.

PLUGGING THE GAP

The figures surrounding social media are, of themselves, astounding.³ However, the organized and professional employment of social media by groups such as IS and, more sporadically, sympathetic individual youths, to recruit other youths into extremism is daunting. There are at least three tactical ways in which Internet radicalization may be countered, online: legal, technical, and more strategically, through counter-narratives.

The laws of many countries relating to the support or commission of terrorism offences were not formulated at a time when the digital era was as pervasive as it has come to be now. Until the attacks of 11 September 2001, offline radicalism and extremism were difficult enough to legislate against and prosecute without infringing upon privacy and civil liberties. Making the online leap and proving evidentiary documentation in a domain where anonymity can be preserved in multiple ways also requires a legal acknowledgement of, and technical provisions for, advanced digital forensics.

More complicated, however, is how difficult it would be for law enforcement authorities to control public access to online material that may or may not be radical or extreme. Or, indeed, whether a determination could be made about the threshold of radical or extreme without offending free speech. This would prove particularly

³ YouTube’s statistics report that in 2010, more than 13 million hours of video were uploaded to YouTube, at a rate of 35 hours every minute. This was equivalent to more than 150,000 full-length movies in cinemas each week. As an indication of how international just this one video streaming service was then, over 70 percent of YouTube’s traffic came from outside the United States with localization in 25 countries across 43 different languages. YouTube has now garnered over 1 billion users with 300 hours of video uploaded to the site every minute. It is localized in 75 countries and available in 61 languages with half of its views on mobile devices. See YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/yt/press/statistics.html>. Likewise, in 2011, Facebook had more than 500 million active users, with about half connecting via mobile. As of December 2014, that number had grown to 890 million, with 745 million being on mobile. Approximately 82.4 percent of Facebook’s daily active users come from outside North America. See “Stats”, Facebook, <http://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/>.

challenging in Western societies. In examining 15 case studies of radicalisation in the digital age, a 2013 RAND Europe report recommended that “relevant agencies reassess the thresholds and criteria for investigation and intervention, as opportunities to access and engage with extremist material increase. This need poses a number of issues, not least whether relevant agencies have the appropriate resources”.⁴

Legal responses will undoubtedly have to be dynamic and grounded in the appropriate social context. They will also, inevitably, run up against a raft of criticisms for offending civil liberties, particularly if they are preventive rather than punitive in nature. Malaysia’s proposed Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA), recently tabled in parliament, has already come under fire, primarily for its potential for abuse due to its preventive nature empowering police to act faster. Under the country’s current laws, however, there is no recognition for evidence – including on social media – gathered from police intelligence and surveillance. This, the government argues, hinders the detention of extremists before they execute harm and destruction. Although controversial, it is becoming increasingly apparent that there will need to be a mix of preventive and punitive laws, especially in light of the proliferation of IS sympathisers and automatons in Southeast Asia who, for various reasons including opportunistic ones, have pledged allegiance to the group’s cause and threatened violence.⁵

Removing, filtering, and hiding extremist websites are quick fixes but apart from the technical difficulties these sometimes entail,⁶ these methods are only temporary measures. As has happened and continues to occur, content from these websites is reproduced – even translated – elsewhere and new or mirror sites pop up almost as instantly as others are blocked or taken down.

The limitations of these tactical measures require a complementary longer-term effort of counter-radicalisation. In a free market of ideas, this would mean battling extremist ideology and interpretations with a probing critique of concepts otherwise unflinchingly accepted. It would also mean presenting a counter-narrative, if not a diverse set of counter-narratives that offer alternative insights. In order for counter-narratives to be credible rather than contrived, the messenger(s) and manner of delivery are as important as the message itself. Given that extremist and terrorist narratives arise out of real or perceived failures of the state, counter-narratives that are overtly

⁴ Ines von Behr, et al. “Radicalisation in the digital era: The use of the internet in 15 cases of terrorism and extremism”, RAND Europe, 2013: Brussels, http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR400/RR453/RAND_RR453.pdf.

⁵ See, for example, “BIFF, Abu Sayyaf pledge allegiance to Islamic State jihadists”, *GMA News*, 16 August 2014, <http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/story/375074/news/nation/biff-abu-sayyaf-pledge-allegiance-to-islamic-state-jihadists>; and “IS threatens Ravi Shankar”, *The Star*, 30 March 2014, <http://www.thestar.com.my/News/Nation/2015/03/30/IS-threatens-Ravi-Shankar-Group-said-to-have-sent-warning-to-kill-Indian-spiritual-leader/>.

⁶ Taking down websites, for example, requires the hosting company to be located in the same jurisdiction and IP filtering can result in over-blocking.

government-sponsored or linked to the establishment are therefore distrusted outright and doomed to fail.

Relatedly and equally importantly, a messenger who is relatable – either by having been part of the extremist community, directly or peripherally, or by having been a victim of a terrorist attack – will appear a lot more credible because of first-hand experience with the message conveyed. Abdullah-X, whose tagline on his social media channels is “Mind of a scholar | Heart of a warrior” used to follow the fiery, extremist teachings of Abu Hamza and Omar Bakri.⁷ He now seeks to provoke thought among young Muslims, particularly those vulnerable to extremist messaging, through the same new media channels terrorists use – YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter – on how these Muslims view faith, identity and their place in society.

Former extremists are also employed by state-run and –supported de-radicalisation programmes in countries like Malaysia and Indonesia to counsel detainees out of their ideology.⁸ The counter-narratives they offer are usually delivered in an unthreatening fashion and with humble authority, with plenty of room for discussion and debate alongside clerics, as appropriate. Overwhelmingly, however, extremist grievances are rooted in the failures of political or socio-economic governance. Religion simply provides the ultimate justification that enervates a boldness of action otherwise missing. Although religious sanctions are a critical component of de-radicalization programmes for those using the cover of sacred texts and verses, there is also a need to address the fundamentally non-religious drivers of terrorism. In Malaysia, for example, the counter-narratives drawn in de-radicalisation programmes offer an outlet for political grievances to be aired. No subject for discussion is off the table within this safe space even if talk of politics usually makes for controversial public conversation.

In Malaysia, as well, detainees are treated with utmost respect from the time of arrest so that the trust that sometimes takes decades to forge is rooted in the right way from the very beginning. At the time of arrest, unless circumstances necessitate, the police make a concerted effort not to handcuff detainees in front of their families. Instead, detainees are asked and encouraged to voluntarily go to the detention centre with accompanying police officers. On many occasions, detainees have expressed gratitude to the police for this simple but meaningful gesture.⁹ These little acts of humanity go

⁷ Abdullah-X website: <http://www.abdullahx.com/>. See, also, Jack Simpson, “Abdullah-X: The new cartoon made by former extremist aimed at stopping Britain’s young Muslims from leaving for Syria”, *The Independent*, 14 July 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/abdullahx-the-new-cartoon-made-by-former-extremist-aimed-at-stopping-britains-young-muslims-from-leaving-for-syria-9604967.html>.

⁸ Sara Schonhardt, “Terrorists go back to school in Indonesia”, *Asia Times*, 22 July 2010, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/LG22Ae01.html; Proditia Sabarini, “Systematic deradicalization program needed: Expert”, *The Jakarta Post*, 26 March 2010, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2010/03/26/systematic-deradicalization-program-needed-expert.html>.

⁹ Author’s conversations with detaining police officers.

a long way towards achieving the eventual success of de-radicalization. The inclusion of family in a comprehensive de-radicalization programme is essential to reintegrating detainees, especially youths, into normality. If social connections, online and offline, are key to the radicalization of an individual, these same connections become just as vital to their de-radicalization.

A recent counter-narrative trend has been through animation addressing problematic themes within Muslim societies in different parts of the world. One of the suppositions about the Muslim world is that in addition to the disturbing rates of illiteracy, poverty, and lack of development entrenched, it also lacks figures and heroes the community can look up to and be proud of.¹⁰ This void is partly what makes the extremist narrative of returning to the Golden Age of Islam a millennium ago attractive. Instead of deprivation and humiliation, there is the promise of a return to glory once the semblance of an Islamic state – whatever that means – reigns supreme.

In response, content creators have come up with creative projections of wit, knowledge, and empowerment targeted at Muslim youths. The *Muslim Show* is a cartoon series about the daily life of French Muslims – their doubts, fears, hopes, and desires. It is enjoyed in some 30 Muslim-majority countries and publicised on social media with a following of more than 600,000 on Facebook. Marvel Comics launched a Muslim and female super hero named Kamala Khan (a.k.a. Ms Marvel) and *Average Mohamed*, a cartoon of a Muslim gas-station manager and brainchild of a Somali-American with the exact same job has just debuted on YouTube with an anti-terror narrative.

MAKING THE ONLINE-OFFLINE CONNECTION

Counter-narratives are an important part of the counter-terrorism equation. However, they are also only one part of that equation. The messaging that is propagated online, in particular, must be underpinned by an acknowledgement and understanding of what actually drives this radicalisation and the context it operates within on the ground.

The process of online radicalization does not fully explain how an individual makes the leap from radical and extreme thinking to, say, journeying to Syria to engage in violence or committing an act of terrorism. Other factors – psychological pre-disposition, personal trauma, environmental or social influences – also contribute to the radicalization of an individual.

¹⁰ In 2005, UNICEF wrote that although the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) represented one-fifth of the world's population and more than one-fourth of the developing world, and the first injunction in the Qur'an was to "read", in some countries of the OIC region, more than half the adult population remained illiterate with 70 percent of women being illiterate. As quoted in *Education and Scientific Development in the OIC Member Countries 2012/2013*, OIC Statistical Economic and Social Research and Training for Islamic Countries (SESRIC), 2012: Turkey. In 2010, the average adult literacy rate in OIC countries was 71.7 percent, below the world average of 80.1 percent and other developing countries' average of 82.5 percent, with a gender discrepancy of about 15 percent. Youth literacy of 83.9 percent was better but still below the world average of 88.9 percent.

Wade Michael Page, who fatally shot six people and wounded four others in a Sikh temple in Wisconsin in 2012, had had a failed army career, a rocky relationship and been dismissed from a series of jobs. It is hard to attribute the corresponding weight of each of these or, indeed, of Page's long-time association with White Power bands urging racial domination, to his state of mind when he terrorized the worshippers. Similarly, the question of just how much a troubled life drove Colleen Renee LaRose a.k.a. Fatima LaRose a.k.a. Jihad Jane to conspire to kill Lars Vilks in the name of religion is an open one.

On the other hand, the stories of Anders Breivik, Roshonora Choudhury, and the 14-year-old Malaysian girl who tried to go to Syria after being exposed to IS propaganda on Facebook seem to make a compelling case for linking online radicalization to an actual act of violence. Breivik took a one-year "sabbatical" to play video games as part of his two-year-long desensitization plan to carry out his attacks in Norway while Choudhury, in police interviews, admitted to listening to hours of Anwar Al-Awlaki's lectures on the Internet and "started to get really into it". Choudhury stabbed the British member of parliament Stephen Timms for voting for war in Iraq.¹¹

While, on the surface, there seems to be a correlation between online radicalization and extremism and terrorism, it is harder to prove a definitive causal relationship. In the same light, it is impossible to identify a single extremist or terrorist profile even if many share broad, common characteristics such as age group and religion. Every vulnerable individual will be motivated by a combination of different push and pull factors that interact with each other. Ahmad Salman, above, is convinced he is simply fulfilling Prophet Muhammad's injunction from 1,400 years ago to fight in modern-day Syria as part of an "army of *mujahideen*" in a series of end-of-day battles. Salman's justification has an additional modern-day rationale – he is also there to avenge Muslims tortured and killed by the Assad regime, and is unaffected by portrayals of him and others as terrorists.¹² Almost always, online activities are a projection of ongoing disaffection on the ground, whether it is personal turmoil or larger real or perceived grievances at the community or even international level. For youths who are searching for answers, the virtual space offers the opportunity to consolidate their identity, explore existential questions, and make sense of their role in a complex and fast-moving world.

The young men and women from all over the world who chose to ignore desperate family entreaties against uprooting to IS-controlled areas of Syria raise disturbing

¹¹ Helen Pidd, "Anders Breivik 'trained' for shooting attacks by playing Call of Duty", *The Guardian*, 19 April 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/apr/19/anders-breivik-call-of-duty>; Vikram Dodd, "Roshonora Choudhury: Police interview extracts", *The Guardian*, 3 November 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2010/nov/03/roshonara-choudhry-police-interview>.

¹² "Eat. Pray. Jihad. Malaysians fighting for IS in Syria say Prophet demands it", *The Malay Mail*, 29 September 2014, <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/malaysia/article/eat.-pray.-jihad.-malaysians-fighting-for-is-in-syria-say-prophet-demands-i>.

questions of, among others, where the Muslim community has faltered in preparing for, and embracing modernity. However, the dilemma is not just to be resolved within the *ummah*. Developments in policies and practices worldwide that gave rise to groups like IS and that have resulted in real and perceived injustices have had enough of an impact on many youths for them to boldly shun the promises of a sound education for those of a martyr's death. After all, why struggle through life when paradise is supposedly guaranteed on the other side of destruction?

These are idealized visions of a utopia, of course, but they seem a lot more titillating to the young than the daily tedium of homework and assignments, the travails of relationships, and the numbing grind of a job without a grand finale worth dying for. Moderation is mundane, especially when juxtaposed with the exhilaration of extremism. But when extremism is recast in apparently religious terms and pitched to those whose understanding of faith and piety is limited to literal, static, and ritualistic interpretations of the twisted, then a deeper introspection of the structural and environmental weaknesses that allow this extremism to fester is warranted.

While there are cautionary commentaries against directly linking issues of poverty and education with terrorism,¹³ there is nonetheless a strong argument to be made for how a broad-based cross-cultural educational experience can be a bulwark against extremism. Rote-learning, in general, and particularly of religious texts does not contextualize the substance of what is being taught or absorbed. In many countries, students are discouraged from questioning lessons related to religion because to do so would border on the sacrilegious and amount to questioning the ultimate authority of God. Learning then no longer becomes an (inter)active pursuit of critical thought and analysis but a passive one that imposes views. Consequently, religion becomes dogma rather than a matter of personal faith. It is taught to be understood in orderly, binary terms when in reality, a believer's relationship with God is often fraught with messy complexities and frustratingly unanswered questions.

Too often these days, to appear religious means to recast life in terms of death. Perhaps one of the most valuable lessons we can teach our young – online and offline – is that life is complicated but that it is a far greater and more noble struggle (“jihad”) to work through those difficulties than to take the coward's way out, by killing or being killed.

CONCLUSION

Technology, the youth, and extremism make for a potent, disturbing mix. The reach and speed of the Internet in the radicalization process of young men and women as exploited by extremists and terrorists since the 1990s is much more remarkable now.

¹³ See, for example, Alan B. Krueger and Jitka Malec'kova', "Education, Poverty and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?" *Journal of Economic Perspectives* (17:4), Fall 2003, 119–144.

It is worth keeping in mind, however, that the Internet is simply a vector in communicating these extreme perspectives. The projection of these views in cyberspace is rather a function of the gamut of real-world factors that span personal tragedy, communal marginalization and humiliation, and policy failures.

Tackling the national security challenges that emanate from the online assertion of extremism must be grounded, first and foremost, in an acknowledgement of its offline drivers and relatedly, the limitations of only responding online. Ultimately, a counter-terrorism strategy aimed at youths must be complemented by a comprehensive whole-of-society approach at the tactical and strategic levels, online (new school) and offline (old school).

Elina Noor is Assistant Director, Foreign Policy and Security Studies at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia. Her policy interests include US-Malaysia bilateral relations, cyber warfare and security, radicalisation and terrorism, and major power relations. An alumnus of Oxford University, the London School of Economics & Political Science, and Georgetown University, she previously worked in Washington, DC at the Center for Nonproliferation Studies, Monterey Institute of International Studies and the Brookings Institution.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Preben Bertelsen

German URL: <http://www.kas.de>

Singapore URL: <http://www.kas.de/singapore>

Email: politics.singapore@kas.de

ISSN 0119-5204

